

As more foreigners arrive in Japan, 'racial homogeneity' appears in print as something that once existed and is now being lost.

THE JAPANESE mass media is not as inward-looking as is often thought: there is fair coverage of events and trends taking place in other countries. However, this coverage tends to focus on Western nations, especially the US. News from Africa and Latin America is still quite rare, being limited largely to news clips or documentaries concerning dramatic events such as wars or natural disasters. Japanese audiences remain underexposed to the culture, values and lifestyles found in the Philippines, Indonesia, Russia and other neighbours, not to mention countries that are geographically more distant.

This state of affairs has helped set the stage for problems in the coverage of Japan's domestic ethnic and cultural diversity. Perhaps the most fundamental of these problems is the media's characterisation of Japanese society as ethnically homogeneous.

In 1986, then-Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro made remarks which implied that the key to Japanese success was the homogeneity of its people. He suggested that this purity made Japanese society superior to that of the US, which was tainted with the blood of blacks, Hispanics and others. While the remarks drew a significant backlash from both the public and media, most critics found fault only with the notion that the Japanese were racially superior, skirting the issue of racial homogeneity completely.

While the major newspapers and news broadcasts do not often refer to Japan's supposed racial homogeneity, such references may be found quite regularly in a variety of programming and magazine articles, as well as in publications of government agencies and political parties, especially those on the conservative side of the political spectrum.

One recent example is the 1998 essay for the National Institute of Materials and Chemical Research by Yoneda Yukio, Professor Emeritus of Tokyo University, in which the writer refers to Japanese as "the language of our nearly homogeneous nation", in order to stress its importance in the world.

The following lines from the official publication of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are of special importance as they actually helped to shape Japan's immigration policy in the early 1990s: "People opposed to the idea of introducing foreign labourers into Japan say that such a move will cause the ethnic structure of our nearly racially homogeneous society to deteriorate. However, they will probably agree to the idea of bringing in foreign nationals who, owing to their Japanese ancestry, are thoroughly acquainted (sic) with Japanese customs."

As more foreigners arrive in Japan, 'racial homogeneity' appears in print as something that once existed and is now being lost. For example, Ishige Naomichi, the Director of the National Folkloric Museum, recently wrote the following words in an official publication of the Finance Ministry. "In about 70% of the nations around the world, one out of 10 people is ethnically different (from the norm). In Japan, it is only one in 100 people. In other words, Japan – which is referred to as a so-called racially homogeneous nation – is an exception among nations." Although these and other similar writings are not part of the mainstream mass media, their influence on the perceptions held by the media and the public is significant.

The belief that Japanese society is homogeneous – or nearly so – is one that has permeated the media and public

perception both domestically and internationally. Indeed, it often seems that the very people who would be expected to rebut the racial homogeneity theory have fallen prey to it themselves. When the term made a rare appearance in a major newspaper last year, it did so in one of Japan's most left-of-centre dailies, as a remark from non-fiction writer Ishikawa Yoshimi, one of Japan's more liberal thinkers: "Japan has enjoyed the strength that comes from having been, in certain respects, a racially homogeneous society. However, this same trait has proved to be a weakness, in the face of globalisation."

The perpetuation of this myth profoundly affects the media's ability to cover ethnic or race-related issues. This is most noticeable in crime reporting.

In 1998, a jewellery store owner in Hamamatsu City (Shizuoka Prefecture), after confirming that a patron was Brazilian, attempted to eject that person from the store, pointing to a poster in that shop that banned all foreigners, and called the police when she refused to go. The woman took the shopkeeper to court on charges of racial discrimination and was awarded damages in a precedent-setting case. While most media companies covered the decision as a positive step, noting, for example, that Japan lacks a domestic law which explicitly prohibits racial discrimination, Tahara Souichiro, one of Japan's most prominent journalists and supposedly a left-of-centre observer, called the *New York Times* coverage of the case "error-filled Japan-bashing" and expressed sympathy for the shopkeeper who had to pay damages.

In 1997, a 14-year-old Brazilian boy was taken captive in front of the Komaki City train station (Aichi Prefecture) where he had been playing with his friends, driven to a remote location and beaten to death by more than 10 Japanese youths. Announcing the three to five year prison sentences for the chief perpetrators of the crime, the judge acknowledged that the youths had attacked the boy solely because he was Brazilian. With the exception of a few articles published after the verdict was announced, no Japanese media reports referred to the killing as a racially motivated hate crime. Rather, articles and news segments that took up the matter often focused on Japanese residents' complaints about the lifestyles of Brazilians living in Japan.

In Japan, it is quite common for mainstream newspapers to print headlines which stress that a crime suspect was foreign or foreign-looking. For example, an *Asahi Shimbun* article of 17 April 2000, reads: "A Man Appearing to be a Foreigner Robbed a Safe and Escaped." Lines such as "the

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The paucity of articles, and the gloominess of the topics, have largely skewed the way the Japanese have come to see Africans:



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'Always Suffering' Japan's favourite stereotypes of Africa

IN JAPAN, the perception of Africa and Africans seems to be made up of stereotypes. Africa, to the extent that it is reported at all, is a remote place, too large and disembodied to offer context to the fragmented reports that readers or viewers see. Sometimes there are, indeed, detailed and conscientious documentaries. NHK, the Japanese public broadcaster, has shown reports on such topics as Liberian child soldiers, the role of radio in the Rwandan genocide and the relationship between 'conflict diamonds' and arms sales. *Asahi Shimbun*, a major newspaper, recently gave in-depth coverage of the outflow from

Africa of its soccer players. But overall, the paucity of articles, and the gloominess of the topics, have largely skewed the way the Japanese have come to see Africans: they are always suffering. Another stereotype of Africans is that they are very 'traditional', a code word for backward. In an advertisement for Canon cameras recently, a Japanese soccer star holding a digital camera is made to stand next to a Masai warrior holding a spear. It is plain they are being put in symbolic opposition. But this is not so much because the Japanese have any racial antipathy; it is rather because African themes

as presented here are so threadbare and one-dimensional. African traditions and wildlife often feature on television, the life of ordinary Africans, less so. How this has come about can be seen from the fact that the three major Japanese dailies, *Asahi*, *Yomiuri* and *Mainichi*, have only one Africa correspondent each. As a consequence, a lot of what Japanese readers see has been filtered through the European and American media, whose newsgathering makes up the shortfall. But European and American media, too, have their stereotypes. Nevertheless, we should not forget the few

Japanese 'Africa lovers', such as Matsumoto Jin'ichi at *Asahi Shimbun*, whose original works on Africa have deepened Japanese understanding of the continent. A deepened understanding is an effective antidote to stereotypical thinking.

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